



GENERATION ART

"The Generational: Younger Than Jesus" exhibition at The New Museum, which runs until mid-May, explores the role that those born after 1976 have in the art world today. Lauren Cornell, adjunct curator at the New Museum and executive director of the museum's new media organization, Rhizome, talks via chatroom with Brendan Fowler whose work appears in the show. Fowler, who was first recognized as a performer under the moniker BARR, talks about his evolution in art, and finding a place in his own generation.

Lauren Cornell: Brendan, you started making photo-collage and works on paper in your late 20s. What were you doing before then? I know, but perhaps you could share with the audience outside this chatroom.

Brendan Fowler: I spent the majority of my early and mid 20s doing performance based work producing a small amount of ephemera, mainly records, associated with the performance work.

For someone with so much energy and who did so much, that sounds very understated.

Ah! You're kind. The whole thing, the whole project existed in the international underground/experimental/DIY world, and also the art world. I performed in clubs and basements and museums and galleries and "other" spaces. You know, like capital O, "Other." But all that that did take up a lot of time, a lot of energy.

The first time I saw you perform was as BARR in Brooklyn — I couldn't believe it. I'd never seen someone turn stories into music with that kind of speed. You were playing with Tracy and the

Plastics, Wynne Greenwood's band/art project. I think you were on tour together.

Ah! That was my ... hmmm ... 25th birthday? Was Lucky Dragons there, as well?

Yes exactly.

That was actually the night before Luke Fischbeck's (of Lucky Dragons) final crit for his Master's at Brown, and it was the first time that he used those electrical conductor things live.

Tell me how BARR began.

It's good that you mentioned Tracy and The Plastics, I always start out by talking about her.

She's worth talking about all the time.

Absolutely! As far as BARR, and where it began, basically, I was involved with the punk/DIY/underground thing from high school on. I was always in bands, but wanted to start a solo thing.

What was the punk/DIY/underground thing like in rural Maryland?

It was, well, it was pre-internet and probably smaller than it maybe is today...I'm not actually sure what exactly it is today, although I am pretty sure it is bigger. It was our few friends in high school finding a few other kids from other high schools at shows, a few adults, very organic, somewhat centralized around parents' houses as much as other underground venues.

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Pre-internet music and DIY scenes were a lot different in that they had the ability to be very local in a way aren't now.

Yes, they were so local. And we had 'zines, and even magazines like *Spin* were sort of still important at that stage. I think that I was probably the last generation to go through high school without the internet. I'm 30. My wife is 28 and her experience was even drastically different.

You seem to carry the politics of that time into your life now — and work. You are very collaborative and you always seem to be making a magazine of some sort. Do you think you still hold the politics of that time?

I think I do. And among other things, Wynne (Greenwood) was so important to me because in the early 2000s, 2001, she showed us that there was room, and need, for new kinds of political discourse in art, personal/political. I think that a lot of people, myself included, would have relegated that kind of instigative push to something like Black Flag or even David Wojnarowicz, to people that were great, and that we all still love, but whose sincerity and confrontational strategies felt dated at that point. Wynne reminded us of the possibility for new models.



I agree. Wynne opened space for direct messages and statements to be made, when some might say that period of time-independent music of the 90s outside movements like riot girl — had our tongues tied.

Your performances, in which you talked at high-speeds furiously, spouting off questions, recounting personal anecdotes, evaluating social dynamics in the room or at large, were at once totally idiosyncratic and yet also touched on larger situations everyone in the room was feeling.

I never even conceived of it as music in the beginning, I always thought of it as more of a march or something.

I always saw it as poetry.

I mean, it was, like, literally just me talking really loudly over drums...

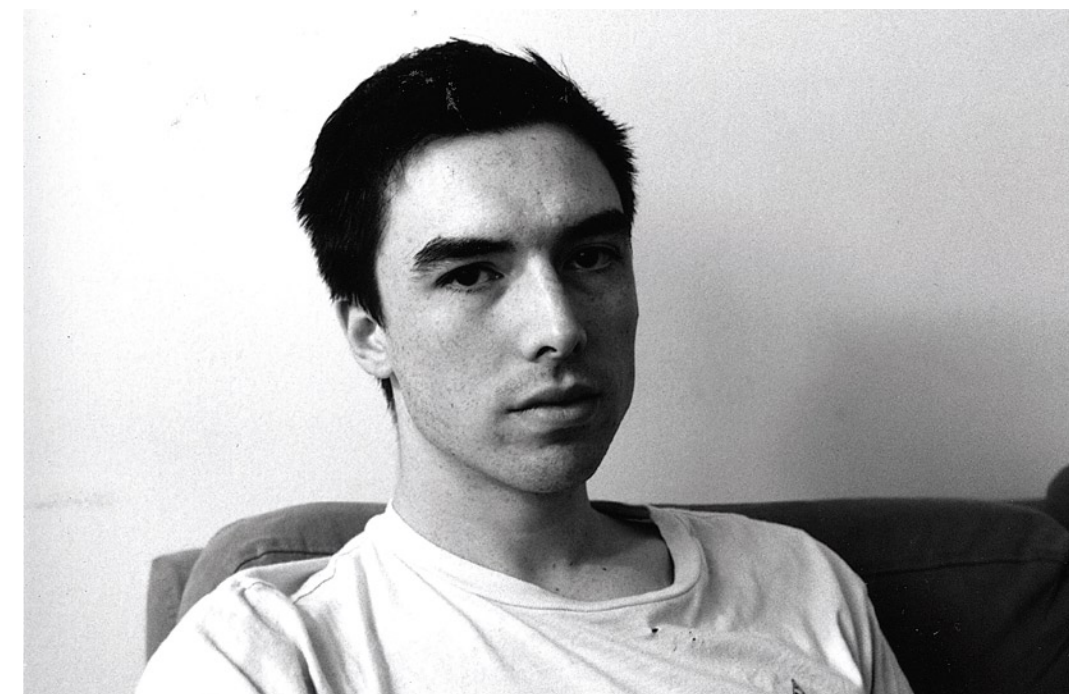
It was also storytelling, which I see as integral to all your work, from performance, magazines to photo-collage. You are a storyteller and each work seems wrapped in a long tangent or narrative. Like the work you had at Rivington Arms. Can you talk about that?

Yes, the storytelling is there, always for me. I think that I am always trying to problem solve, to navigate situations, and the BARR stuff was a hope that somehow the navigations could be useful to other people. I had spent all this time focused on BARR and at some point, after performing and sort of functioning within the art world for so long, I was ready to slow down with the touring and also just think in new ways, create new strategies for myself. I wanted to make objects that could stick around after I had left town. I had included object-based works in group shows, but the Rivington Arms show was my first solo show. BARR was the starting point for all of the work in it. You know,

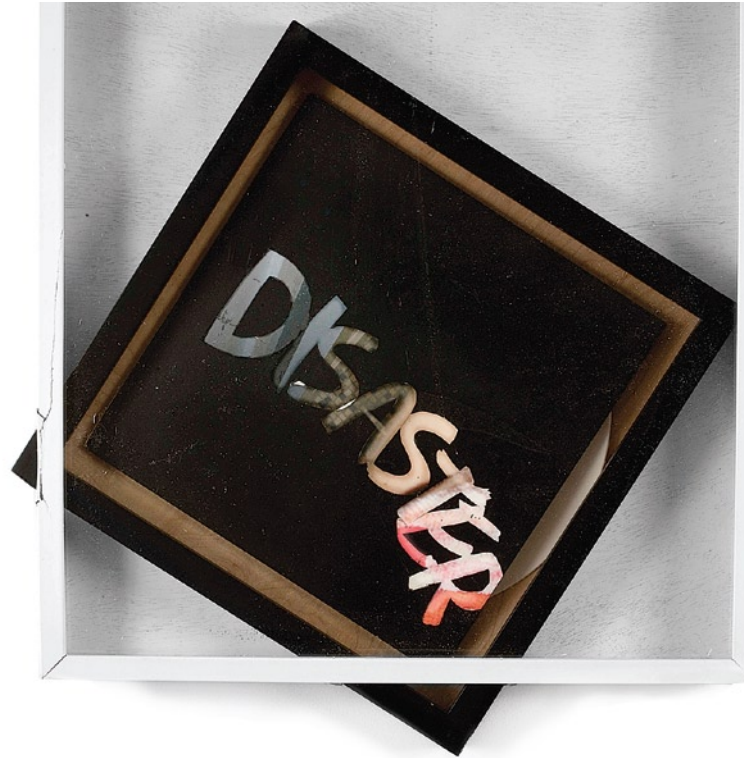
Exactly.

BARR was all about speaking, rawness and vulnerability.

Yes, it was all about being as direct as possible.



BRENDAN FOWLER: UNTITLED 2008. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MESLE&HUG.



ARTIST BRENDAN FOWLER'S "DISASTER" (ABOVE) IS PART OF "THE GENERATIONAL: YOUNGER THAN JESUS" EXHIBITION AT THE NEW MUSEUM.

"I wanted to make objects that could stick around after I had left town."

using material I knew, and applying it through new strategies of production. What I found were a few strategies that I loved, a few that I didn't love — at all — and a lot of ideas for new ones, which beget new ones and so on, just as one show leads to another (ideally) and so forth. At this point I am more interested in these object based modes for narrative. I am actually so excited, like, maybe more excited than I ever was in the music days.

Why do you think?

But I don't actually separate it like that. I mean, I can separate, like, 'performance involves touring, whereas object based work involves being in one place, the studio,' but for the most part I try to think of everything as equal. It's just a matter of what makes the most sense, which honestly, probably has the most to do with timing. Can I ask you a question?

Yes.

I heard somewhere that the idea for "The Generational" came from Massimiliano [Gioni] feeling like he maybe could not relate to all young art, and that rather than ignoring it, he wanted to make a show to deal with it professionally and to make everyone else have to as well. Is this true? I love this idea, and if it's true, I really have so much respect for that decision process.

Yes, I believe that was one of his motivations.

Great. I love it!

I think he started to see strangeness in youth and he wanted to explore it and at the same time to look at generations in art and particularly Generation Y, because it was being so speculated about in so many other parts of culture, so why not do it in art?

Absolutely!

The difference is for us, the picture we created is very complex and pluralistic, and it is nothing you could bottle up, or target or sell. It is pointing in many different directions at once, but there are links in the work.

Absolutely. In fact, what I wanted to ask you is if you felt like there were sub-generations? I mean, I know it is an actual literal generation, but are you seeing accelerated differences among certain age groups, like the early 30s vs. early 20s?

Well, I have two answers to that and they are in contradiction. The first is a bit sci-fi and it is, "yes," I think generations are turning over faster now as ideas and knowledge gathering, dissemination, culture formation moves so quickly. The second, is that I don't believe that ideas are bound to age necessarily, so while there are shared attitudes and artistic tendencies here, these are also driven by conversations across generation.

That makes complete sense and from what I see I agree with both points.

I worked with this thought for this show, with the notion of generations in art as a question. And I hope people will see it that way too because it's an interesting one and it is the default way art is looked at. At the same time, there are artists in this show whose work I understand and believe in, in a way that has to do with getting them on a peer level. For instance I feel your Aidswolf piece is a very important expression of politics now. Its a comment on the way the name of a disease, which was formerly a massive

BARR was kind of a deconstruction of the pop band, so I wanted to deconstruct the art about rock thing, kind of from the inside.

What is the art about rock thing?

Oh, the thing of people making art about rock and roll. I think it has at times struck particular nerves for me.

Why?

Really anytime someone fetishizes the other kind of drives me crazy. This is not always the case when people make object based art about music, but I was thinking, like, for a while I was interested in bringing this new insight to that idea, the "art about rock" thing, but now I am thinking of it in purer terms. The work is autobiographical, and winds up borrowing from the cultural signifiers of my past. I am still storytelling, still problem solving, just using new models, and new structures. And talking to other music people, I never felt like a musician, really. I always approached BARR more as a conceptual project, with conceptual parameters. I would always assign new constraints to it.

Is that how you approach your visual art? At the Rivington Arms show, you had pieces of paper with fragments of words written on paper and photo-collage; did it all belong to one idea or narrative?

It did, and that is really important to me. I think of my practice as being kind of equal parts storytelling and problem solving, or the problem of how best to tell the story. The stories that I was telling in the Rivington show were like, half me retelling stories from the last BARR stuff before it, and half new stories. But with the retelling of BARR stuff, I think it was about trying to feel out new models for me,

crisis that decimated the gay community, can be appropriated years later by a band, and your interrogation of it unfolds through commenting on their Myspace page and then avoiding them in real life and then meeting them in real life — a kind of situation that could really only happen now.

It's true. And you know, the thing is that it took me a little while to see that, or to see why, aside from actual dates, I really am in the same generation as Ryan Trecartin, who is one of my favorite artists, but at times I feel like I love him so much because he is articulating something that only someone his age could articulate so well.

I feel that way about him; and that was the point I was making about BARR and also the AIDS Wolf and photo collage work in the show.

Thank you Lauren. Another big realization for me was that what Josh Smith does is so inherently now, this time. He is really taking the particular painting dialog that he is a part of, which he took from Christopher Wool and others before him, to the new next place, the place that someone from our generation has to take it to.

How do you see your work in the show fitting as part of this generational conversation?

I think that that's the thing, it has really taken me a while to look at the artists in this show and try to assemble the "generational make-up" — if there is one — of our group. I think I see it, but it is hard — hard for me, and I would imagine most, in the way that it is hard to see something when you are looking out from the center of it. Honestly, part of me would like to think that someone else could talk about my-of-the-moment navigations of artistic precedent, my perverting of traditional framing methods and contributions to sculpture, but I think that I am going to have to leave it at this: since at the base my work is about addressing and sharing my experiences in hopes that they may resonate or prove useful in some ways for others, I guess I am sort of unwittingly making work about our generation from the inside, although, honestly, I had not even thought of it in this way until you asked. ☺

CULTURALLY AWARE ART LIKE FOWLER'S "11-16-07, 11-18-07" (RIGHT), AND HIS POSTER TO SHOW HIS DISLIKE FOR A BAND THAT CALLED ITSELF "AIDS WOLF" (RIGHT, TOP) CONTRIBUTE TO PUBLIC INTRIGUE OF THE NEW MUSEUM'S SHOW WHERE EACH OF THE ARTISTS INCLUDED WERE BORN BEFORE 1976.

